

A FEW WORDS
ON
STRIKES AND COMBINATIONS
AMONG
WORKMEN.

PUBLISHED UNDER THE DIRECTION OF
THE COMMITTEE OF GENERAL LITERATURE AND EDUCATION,
APPOINTED BY THE SOCIETY FOR PROMOTING
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1848.

ON

STRIKES AND COMBINATIONS.

WAGES are not dependent upon the will of those who pay them; nor is a master always able to pay his workmen as large wages as he and they would desire. There are various reasons for this. It may be, that a master's profit does not admit of his expending more than a given sum in wages; and the capital he has invested in the construction of his farm-buildings, purchase of his implements of husbandry, if he be a farmer, or of his mill machinery, if he be a manufacturer, oblige him to require a remunerating interest for the money he has laid out. In fact, wages can only be altered by changing the proportion between the number of labourers, and the funds set apart for their maintenance.

But workpeople, in the manufacturing districts, with a view to raising the ordinary rate of wages, have, of late years, resorted to the expedient of unions, or combinations and strikes, to effect their object. It is proposed to show you with what bad effect these strikes and combinations have been attended, both to workmen and to their masters; but, more especially, to workmen.

A union is a combination of workpeople against

their masters to carry some particular object; this is, generally, to force up wages; on the presumption that masters are able, if they choose, to give a higher rate than they do: but these unions have often other objects in view besides this one. Sometimes they would dictate to the masters when and by whom they shall get their work done; sometimes they would prevent them from taking apprentices; sometimes they would prohibit them from paying their workpeople by the piece, and insist upon all being paid at a particular rate of day wages, irrespective of the work done being bad or good.

The following examples will show you with how little success their efforts to raise wages by these means have been attended:—

In the year 1810, the spinners in all the mills in the neighbourhood of Manchester, including Stockport, Macclesfield, Staley-bridge, Hyde, Oldham, Bolton, and Preston, turned out, and 30,000 people were thrown out of employ. Their object was to raise the wages in these country districts to a level with those in Manchester. Now, it so happens that in Manchester, wages have always been, and must of necessity always be, higher than in the surrounding places; and for the following reasons: First, all the yarn and goods that are made in England are sent to Manchester to be sold; and thus Manchester enjoys facilities for obtaining raw cotton hardly equalled by any other town in the kingdom. Secondly, there also the principal machine-makers reside; therefore, master manufacturers can get their machines at less expense there, than others who live at a greater distance. Thus they can afford to pay their men at a higher rate; but the country masters are deprived of these advantages, and are consequently obliged to reduce the wages of their workmen to a lower rate, as otherwise they would be unable to get the same profit on their capital as the Manchester manufacturers; and without this, they must cease working;

for, it is merely the average rate of profit they obtain, and their ability to get their work performed at lower prices than at Manchester, that is the condition of their remaining in the business at all. On the occasion in question, *4d.* was paid in the country districts for spinning a lb. of cotton, and $4\frac{1}{2}d.$ in Manchester; and to raise the country wages to this latter sum was the aim of the union.

But the attempt proved a signal failure, as from its folly and injustice it was right it should. After four months of misery, during which time the hard-earned savings of years of industry were consumed, and furniture, clothes, and every article of comfort or convenience was disposed of, these misguided men were obliged to return to their work, not at the rate of *4d.*, which they had been previously earning, but at *2d.*; thus submitting to a reduction of 50 per cent. on those wages, to raise which every thing but existence had been staked.

In 1824, all the cotton spinners in Hyde turned out for an increase of wages: but this time it was much against the will of the workmen; the committee of the union to which they belonged insisted upon it. The result of this strike was, that the men, after enduring the greatest hardship, came back to their work at the same wages which they had turned out to raise.

In 1830, 3000 spinners at Ashton and Staley-bridge left their work, by which fifty-two mills, and 20,000 people, at least, were thrown idle for ten weeks. At the end of that time, they returned to their work at the same wages they had previously been receiving.

Such has been the result of these attempts to force up wages. Now, look at the consequence of the efforts of the unions to effect some of the other objects mentioned above.

A union in Leeds required of a manufacturer in that town to pledge himself to weave and spin all the

cloth he made upon his own premises, on pain of a strike; and, moreover, besides having none of it done in the neighbouring villages, as had hitherto been his custom, to pay the workpeople the prices they demanded. The master consented; but, what did he do next? He immediately reduced his manufacture two-thirds, took in work of a different description; and, consequently, his weavers' earnings were reduced from 17s. to 7s., and his spinners' from 27s. to 10s. After enduring this for three months, his workmen petitioned him to recommence manufacturing as before; but he refused to comply with their wishes.

Another master in Leeds employed a considerable number of workhouse children, who were learning their business at the factory. It did not suit the purposes of the union that these children should be thus employed; and having found that one of the overseers was a butcher, they threatened him with the loss of all his custom if he did not prevent the children from working in the interdicted factory. The overseers yielded, the children were withdrawn from their employment, and the parish had to pay the whole charge for their maintenance.

Unions are usually managed by a committee, which, in many cases, is invested with absolute power, and can exercise its authority in ordering strikes, without any regard for their fellow-workmen, who suffer by them; and it has more than once done so, contrary to the wishes and inclinations of the men, who are often satisfied with the amount of their wages when the committee is not so. The ceremonies of admission into these unions are of very awful description. Oaths are administered, binding the takers of them to forward to the utmost of their power the objects of the combination; but, what is much worse than this, some unions have imposed the most wicked and atrocious oaths, recognizing the principle of compelling people to join the union, and actually sanction-

ing the assassination of oppressive and tyrannical masters¹.

It is not difficult to understand that a system thus based upon violence, should lead to acts of violence; and, accordingly, such has been the result, as the following examples will show:—

In 1829, a Manchester manufacturer, named Ashton, was shot at, and killed. In 1823, a Scottish union attacked the lives of individuals who refused to join them; there were four instances of deliberate attempts at assassination, and two to burn cotton mills. One man confessed that he had been employed to murder some of the masters, who had incurred the displeasure of the union; and that, for the attempt, he was to receive 100*l*. If he succeeded in murdering his victims, he was to receive more!

In 1833, at Glasgow, a woman named Macshaffery, a cotton-stretcher, while about entering a street leading to her residence, was met by some men, one of whom threw into her face and on her clothes a quantity of vitriol, whereby one of her eyes was entirely destroyed, and her face otherwise severely injured. On the same day, a man named Millar, a foreman in the cotton-spinning trade, was attacked on his way home, and struck with a heavy sharp weapon, which wounded him on the head, and felled him to the ground.

I will conclude this account of the fearful crimes to which these combinations lead, by relating one or two

¹ The following is the oath that was taken by the combined spinners in Scotland, in 1823:—

“I, A. B., do voluntarily swear in the awful presence of Almighty God, and before these witnesses, that I will execute with zeal and alacrity, as far as in me lies, every task or injunction which the majority of my brethren shall impose upon me, in furtherance of our common welfare; as the chastisement of knobs, the assassination of oppressive and tyrannical masters, or the demolition of shops that shall be deemed incorrigible; and, also, that I will cheerfully contribute to the support of my brethren who shall lose their work in consequence of their exertions against tyranny, or renounce it in resistance to a reduction of wages,” &c.

more instances which have occurred so lately as the year 1840.

In the month of October, of that year, a strike occurred amongst the sawyers at Ashton-under-Lyne. Their employers had found it necessary, on account of a depression in the trade, to reduce their wages to the same scale as those of workmen employed in the same labour at Manchester; and, on their announcing the intention, the men refused to continue at their work. Upon this, some of the masters, being deserted by their regular workmen, engaged others in their places. These men judged the demands of their brother workmen to be unreasonable, and the wages offered to be fair, otherwise they would not have engaged themselves; and, surely, in a free country men have a perfect right to work for what wages they choose. The turn-outs, however, determined to prevent the others from exercising this just right. They assembled in crowds before the houses of the employers, and paraded the streets, using intimidating and abusive language to the new workmen. They endeavoured, also, to terrify the men's wives, declaring that they would knock their husbands' brains out; and, in one instance, they showed a poor woman a sack, telling her it was to put her husband's body in.

About a fortnight after the strike, as four of the new workmen were returning home, they were waylaid and attacked by a number of ruffians, and one of them, named Garland, was beaten to death.

On the 20th of October, a hole was made in the door of the house of one of the employers, and several pounds of gunpowder were poured into it through a funnel, evidently with the intention of blowing up the house; but the villains were interrupted by the watchman, who gave an alarm; and for this act of duty he was dreadfully beaten by three men with blackened faces.

Some while afterwards a gun, loaded with small shot, was fired at the place where two of the new

workmen were usually employed; and had it not chanced that both of them were at the time at the bottom of the pit, the top-sawyer must inevitably have been killed.

It was on the 11th of December, that the most dreadful deed was perpetrated. Two workmen, Benjamin and James Cooper, were engaged, soon after dusk, in their occupation in the yard, in the very heart of the town. Benjamin was at the top, and had a candle fixed on his leg, in order that he might see the line marked on the wood. As they were thus employed, a tremendous explosion was heard, which alarmed the whole neighbourhood, and it was found that a murderous engine, loaded with slugs, had been fired through the crevices of the shed in which the men were employed. Four slugs entered the body of Benjamin Cooper. The poor man being carried by his brother to his lodgings, lingered for two hours in great agony, and then expired, calling on God to provide for his widowed wife and family.

Such, my friends, is the atrocious wickedness to which, in many instances, these diabolical unions have led.

Speaking generally, workmen have a perfect right to bargain with their employers for the wages of labour; though, of course, if workmen demand more than is reasonable, or masters persist in offering less than is reasonable, the unreasonable party is morally wrong. Christians ought to be just and liberal to each other. Even their temporal interests will soon enable them to come to terms, if they act with moderation; but neither party can be justified in using violence or unlawful means to accomplish their object, even if it should be just. In the cases before us, nothing can be more unjust than the whole proceeding. Because a small number of men are dissatisfied with their wages, double, triple, nay, quadruple their number must be deprived of their lawful means of

subsistence. The freedom of action of our fellow-creatures is set at nought; and inasmuch as a man does not choose to do that which is manifestly wrong by his employers and detrimental to his own interests, he is liable to persecution, and even to death, at the wills of a band of misguided men, whose doings must inevitably end by bringing ruin upon themselves.

It would be an object of national utility, could the truth be impressed on the minds of the working classes, that their combinations, in place of being advantageous, have almost invariably proved prejudicial to themselves.

In the first place, they are a perpetual drain upon their earnings. Each member of a union is required to pay a given sum out of his wages, varying from 3*d.* to 1*s.*, 2*s.*, and even as much as 5*s.* weekly.

When on strike, the regulations generally are, that workmen shall receive from 7*s.* to 10*s.* weekly; but, in practice, they seldom get more than a mere pittance, barely enough to support existence. A large proportion of the fund thus wrung from the work-people goes to pay secretaries and delegates, who receive from 3*s.* 6*d.* to 5*s.* a day, and have their travelling expenses paid in addition. Thus wofully do these men prey upon the resources of the workmen whom they mislead! After weeks, nay, perhaps, months of idleness and privation, they have invariably been obliged to return to their work, in many cases at less wages, but never at more than they turned out for.

In the next place, a strike invariably introduces new workmen into the trade, and thus increases the number of labourers, without, at the same time, increasing the fund for their maintenance. In consequence of the turn-out at Ashton, in 1825, more than 300 persons were instructed in spinning; and every turn-out has ended in a reduction of wages immediately afterwards, in consequence of the influx of fresh hands causing a superabundance of labour.

Not all the violence of unionists can prevent this natural course of things from taking place. Thus is exemplified what you have already been told, namely, "that wages can only be altered by changing the proportion between the number of labourers, and the funds set apart for their maintenance."

In the third place, strikes have been the cause of the invention and introduction of machinery, the effect of which has been to supersede the labour of men. Such was the invention of the wool-combing machine, which has enabled manufacturers to free themselves, in a great measure, from the dictation of those whom they employ. This occurred in consequence of a strike at the factory of a well-known manufacturer at Leeds, in 1833; and this at a time when the families employed by him were earning at the rate of nearly thirty shillings a-week. Another strike of the same kind in 1835, amongst the boiler-riveters of a Manchester manufacturer, at a time when he was under heavy engagements, produced the invention of a machine to rivet boilers by steam pressure; and such was the success of the attempt, that the master in question was enabled to proceed with his work with so increased a degree of rapidity and precision, as to dispense with the turn-outs altogether. Thus they found, to their cost and vexation, that they had for ever lost the employment of a kind and generous master.

A third instance of the same kind may also be cited, namely, the introduction of the self-acting mule, superseding the labour of the spinners. This occurred in consequence of a turn-out of these workmen in 1824, by which immense numbers of the working classes, whose labour depended upon that of the spinners, were forced to leave their employment. This machine has not only secured the trade from the frequent strikes to which it was subject, but it has proved much more economical, causing less waste, fewer breakages, and enabling the weaver to turn off more from his loom.

In the fourth place, strikes have been the cause of manufactures being altogether driven from the places where they were originally established. Of this numerous instances may be given. In consequence of the high wages demanded by the silk-weavers in Spitalfields, the manufacture was removed to Macclesfield and Paisley; and Macclesfield, in turn, has lost part of its silk trade, to the benefit of Manchester, from the same causes that had before driven it from London. Some manufacturers have lately left Coventry, owing to the continual annoyances from strikes to which they were exposed in that town, and established factories in Essex. The carpet trade has been seriously injured by the strikes in Kidderminster, and has, in consequence, partly migrated to Kilmarnock. But, perhaps, Ireland has suffered more than any other country in this way, by the folly of its working population. Owing to the Union in Dublin, planks can be cut into boards nearly five per cent. cheaper in Liverpool than in that town; and, consequently, ship-building, which had long lingered in Ireland, has now deserted the shores of that island almost entirely. Some time ago, an Irish manufacturer required for his business several large metal utensils, and being desirous that his own country should have the profit of supplying them, he called upon the master of some iron-works, and stated his readiness to sacrifice a considerable per-centage, rather than that the order should be sent from the country. The master informed him that he was incapacitated from manufacturing the articles, even at the proposed advance of price; and that he was prevented from competing with his English rivals, not from any want of coal, or from any local advantages that were possessed on the other side of the Channel, but solely on account of the combinations by which he was beset. The result was, that the manufacturer was obliged to have recourse to the English market.

An extensive iron-master in Dublin, Mr. R., constructed several years ago a machine for the manu-

facture of nails; the nail-makers determined to prevent its use, and got the workmen in those trades in which nails are used, to pass a resolution that they would not work with any that had been made by this machine. Consequently machine-made nails from Birmingham quickly drove the Dublin ones out of the market; the manufacture of nails left the latter place altogether, and has, I believe, never returned. The blanket manufacture at Kilkenny has almost entirely left that town, because, as soon as the workpeople discovered that a manufacturer had a contract for making blankets, or that there was a demand for goods, they immediately struck, and would not work unless for very high prices: hence the manufacturers were unable to enter into contracts lest they should be disappointed, and the manufacture went down altogether. In 1821, the colonel of a regiment of dragoons gave an order for some saddles to an army accoutrement maker in Dublin. The master-saddlers in that city on learning the circumstance declared it was an encroachment upon their trade, and incited the journeymen, who were to perform the work, to turn out against their master, who was, in consequence, compelled to give up the contract. The saddlers, however, did not profit by their conduct, as none of them got the order, which was thus lost to Ireland altogether.

The examples of injurious effects arising from combinations among workmen have been taken principally from the cotton trade.

It will be well to notice their evil effects in some other trades.

One of the most extensive unions in the kingdom is that formed by the workmen in the building trade. In the year 1833, that body commenced operations in Manchester, Liverpool, and other towns. They dictated to their employers in every possible way; they objected to contracts being taken by them; they interfered with their engaging apprentices; they threat-

ened to strike if any of the workmen were discharged for whatever cause, having, however, nothing to complain of on the score of wages, which had never been less than 24s. weekly for the last twenty years, and often a great deal more. The masters found that these demands placed such serious impediments in the way of their business, that they determined to employ no men except such as should sign a declaration that they did not belong to the trades' union. The men refused to comply, and a general turn-out ensued. For six months they persisted in the strike, when, finding the masters were still firm, the combination was forsaken by all, and they returned to their employers, requesting work on the old terms. But they had paid dear for their folly. During the best part of the year, when their labour was most in request, and their wages the highest, they had remained idle, living on the scanty allowance doled out to them from the union funds. They had hoped that their masters would have been willing and eager to employ them when the strike was at an end; but, in consequence of their refusal to work when there was work in abundance for all, many of the buildings were discontinued, and the places of some of the men were supplied by fresh labourers brought from distant parts, and also by machinery, so that the application for employment could not be granted, and thus the misery of pauperism awaited them; but, what was worse than all, their long cessation from work had produced habits of idleness, and with idleness its never-failing companion, immorality, ensued, and unmitigated evil was the result of the whole.

We now come to the subject of combinations and unions amongst colliers and miners. At this time (1847) combinations exist in some of the coal districts, by which the workmen bind themselves not to work more than a certain quantity of coal, their object being to keep up the price of coal by never having too large a stock on hand. Observe, now, the mischief

which has been done to trade in general by such combinations as these amongst colliers, not to work more than a certain quantity of coal.

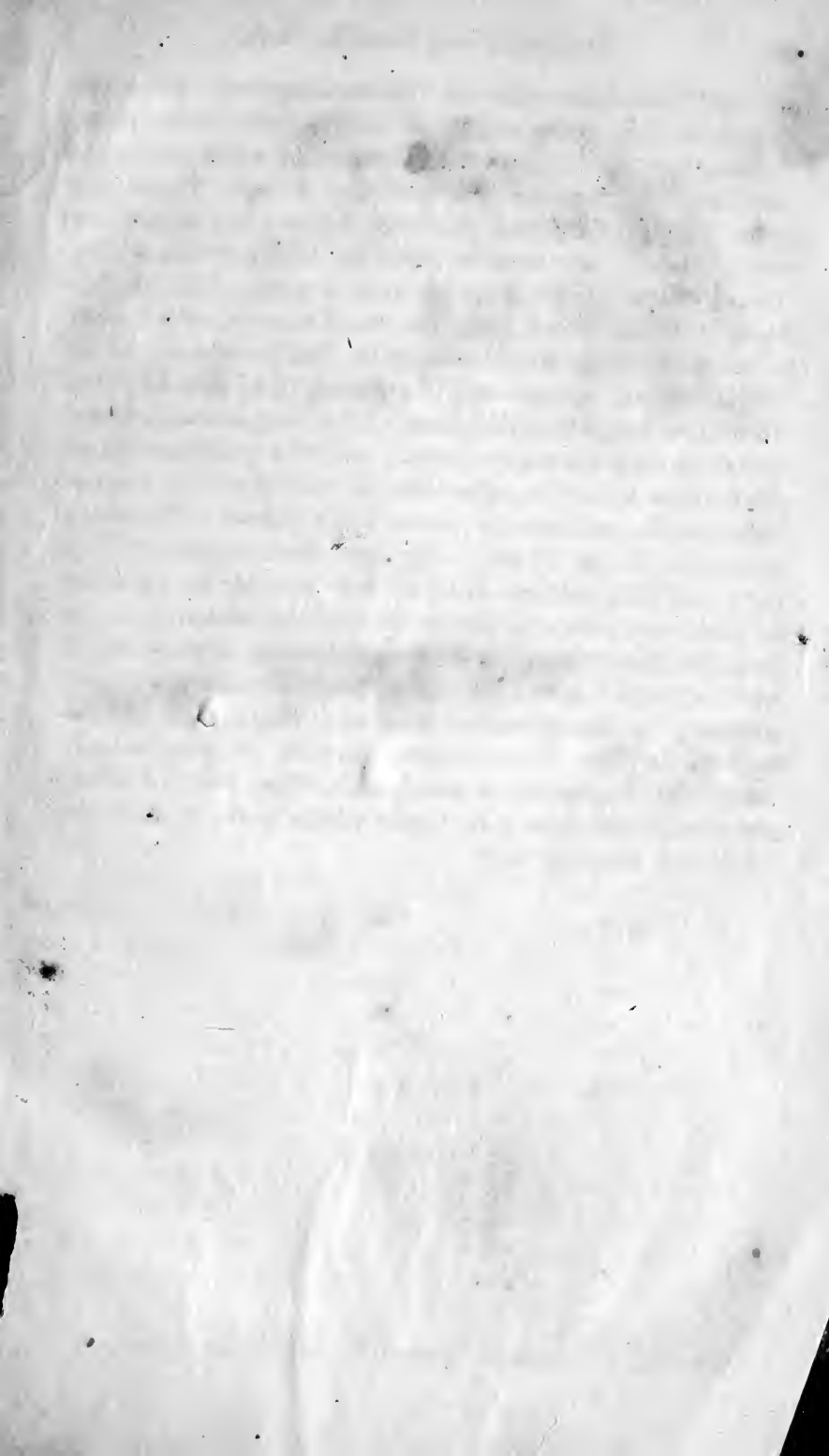
It happened that two leading iron-masters in Glasgow received a large order for pig-iron from Germany, on condition that it should be delivered for from 60s. to 65s. a ton. This price would have afforded a fair profit to the iron-master, and a fair rate of wages to the collier and ironstone miner, enabling them to earn from 3s. 6d. to 4s. a day by ten hours of reasonable labour; but, by their combination, the miners had so raised the price of the raw material, out of which the pig-iron is made, that the iron-master was obliged to charge 70s. or 75s. a ton² for the iron which he ought to have been able to produce for 60s. to 65s. Now, see the consequence of this: out of one hundred furnaces in Lanarkshire fifteen were not in work at all, and others not fully employed on account of the high price of coal. The iron required, not having been obtained in Scotland, was made elsewhere, some in Germany itself, and some in America. Thus the trade and advantage were lost to Lanarkshire in consequence of the combination of the colliers and miners there.

Again, coal-masters are obliged, in consequence of colliers restricting their labour, to keep one-third more men in their employ, to sink one-third more pits with engines, railways, horses, &c. In addition to this increased charge, they are obliged to pay a higher price per ton for coal and ironstone on account of the diminished quantity of both being produced; and all this operates most injuriously in their competition with foreign trade and other producers both at home and abroad, where combinations do not exist. In many of the manufacturing towns of Staffordshire, in consequence of the high price of coal, trade is suffering in a very serious degree.

² This includes all charges.

The principal trade of Wolverhampton, and other towns, consists in the making of hinges, bolts, nails, locks, screws, &c., the main part of the cost of which is that of the iron, and the coal for working it up. Coals are now (1847) 12s. a ton, whereas, a few years ago, they were 6s. 6d.; bar iron is 10l.; in 1842, it was 5l. 5s. These high prices have driven a great deal of this trade to Prussia and Belgium; and screws, which used to be made almost exclusively in Staffordshire and at Birmingham, are actually imported into Birmingham from Hamburgh and Belgium. Manufacturers are often forced to stop for want of coal; and the combination of the colliers to keep up the price of coal makes it impossible for the masters to reduce their prices sufficiently to enable them to meet foreign competition. It is very sad that colliers and miners should be so blind to their own interest, and to that of the community, as thus to labour hard to destroy the very foundation of our national advantage as a manufacturing people, namely, the cheapness of iron and coal; thus encouraging foreign competition, instead of successfully combating it, and do as much as in them lies to destroy and extinguish the very trade which is their mainstay for future employment.

THE END.



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